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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how androgynous men and women are evaluated relative to those who are sex-typed or sex reversed, and also investigates the joint effects of attractiveness and sex-role upon such evaluation. Two studies with replicable results were conducted. In each, approximately 185 male and 185 female undergraduates were asked to rate one stimulus person on a series of bi-polar trait adjectives after reading a fictitious supervisory report about that person. The results indicate that the androgynous sex-role has advantages over traditionally sex-typed or sex-reversed roles, the androgynous person being rated as more physically attractive, popular and interesting. The results further suggest that androgyny might be a more positive alternative for women than for men, since androgynous women were rated higher on all evaluative dimensions, while androgynous men were rated as less assertive and less masculine than the sex-typed male. A possible explanation may be that a moderate degree of assertiveness and a high degree of affiliativeness represent the most positive evaluation of a person; alternatively, it may be that androgyny is perceived to be more similar to the feminine sex-role than to the masculine. (PFS)

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EFFECTS OF PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS, SEX, AND SEX-ROLE ON TRAIT ATTRIBUTIONS

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Concurrent with Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation and outcry against the rigidity and constraints of sex-role stereotypes, psychologists have begun to question traditional conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity. Recently several authors, such as Constantinople (1973), Bem (1974), and Spence and her colleagues (1975) have questioned whether masculinity and femininity represent bipolar ends of a single continuum. This dichotomy, they argue, arbitrarily divides persons into only two categories -- masculine or feminine, and ignores the possibility that a person might be both masculine and feminine.

As a result of these questions, theory, research and discussion around the concept of androgyny have been growing. Theoretically, the person who is "androgynous" is not bound to the characteristics of only one sex, as are sex-typed and sex-reversed persons, but instead embraces the characteristics of both sexes in his or her self-image. Research on the behavioral and personality correlates of androgyny has revealed certain advantages of being androgynous, such as higher self-esteem (Spence, Helmreich & Stapp, 1975) and greater behavioral flexibility (Bem, 1975, 1976). And some authors, for example Sandra Bem, have elevated androgyny to the ideal sex-role for our contemporary society.

No research, however, has considered how the androgynous person is perceived by others. Is he or she liked better than a traditionally sex-

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typed person? Or alternatively, is an androgynous person perceived to be as assertive as a masculine male or as affiliative as a feminine female?

Generally, past research investigating the effects of sex-role on trait attributions and attraction has revealed that men and women who are traditionally sex-typed are preferred to those who are sex-reversed (Sey ried & Hendrick, 1973; Spence, Helmreich & Stapp, 1975). But this research has failed to consider how a third sex-role option -- androgyny -- might affect impression formation. Thus, the major purpose of this research was to investigate how androgynous men and women are evaluated relative to those who are sex-typed or sex-reversed.

One variable which might affect the perceptions of persons with varying sex roles is physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness has been found to be an important variable in impression formation, and a large body of research has supported the existence of a physical attractiveness stereotype of "What is beautiful is good" (Dion, Berscheid & Walster, 1972; Miller, 1970). Briefly, physically attractive persons are assumed to possess more socially desirable traits and to lead happier and more successful lives than are unattractive individuals. Further research, however, has indicated that this stereotype is qualified by the sex of the person who is being evaluated (Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1972).

These findings suggest several possibilities concerning the joint effects of sex role and physical attractiveness on impression formation. On the one hand, physical attractiveness and sex-role might interact to affect impression formation differentially for male and female stimulus persons. On the other hand, sex-role and physical attractiveness stereotypes may act in an additive fashion to affect impression formation such

that a person with two undesirable characteristics -- an inappropriate sex-role and unattractiveness is evaluated most negatively for both sexes. Thus, a second purpose of this research was to investigate these alternative hypotheses concerning the joint effects of attractiveness and sex-role.

Method

In order to explore the effects of physical attractiveness and sex-role on impression formation, two studies with almost identical procedures were conducted. In both, four variables were varied in a four factor between-subject design: sex of subject, sex of stimulus person, sex-role of stimulus person and attractiveness of stimulus person. In each study approximately 185 male and 185 female undergraduates were each asked to rate one stimulus person on a series of bi-polar trait adjectives after reading a fictitious supervisory report about that person.

The supervisory report contained background information about the stimulus person which was identical for all conditions. This was followed by a paragraph, supposedly written by the stimulus person's work supervisor, which described the person with either all masculine, all feminine, or an equal number of masculine and feminine adjectives. These adjectives were selected from the masculinity and femininity subscales of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974).

Attached to each supervisory report was a photograph of the stimulus person. These photographs were selected from college yearbook photos which had been previously rated for attractiveness. The high, medium and low attractive male and female photographs were selected. These photos were completely crossed with sex of the stimulus person and sex-role of the stimulus person, thereby creating 18 different conditions

to which equal numbers of males and females were randomly assigned.

Results

Results of the second study closely replicated those of the first, thus for ease of presentation the common findings will be discussed. The 17 bipolar trait adjectives on which stimulus persons were evaluated were factor analysed and five clusters were obtained. These clusters corresponded to the following general traits: social likability, assertiveness, affiliation, ability, and masculinity/femininity.

Analysis of the cluster comprising social likability traits revealed a main effect for sex role. The androgynous person was considered more popular, interesting and physically attractive than the sex-typed or sex-reversed person.

With respect to ratings of ability, no effects were obtained for sex of stimulus person or for sex-role of the stimulus person. Thus, the data from these two studies lend no evidence that men are perceived as any more competent than are women, or that persons with masculine traits are perceived as more able than those with feminine traits.

Analysis of the assertiveness cluster, which was comprised of traits traditionally considered masculine, revealed a highly significant interaction between sex of stimulus person and sex-role of stimulus person. The direction of the interaction, presented in Figure 1, indicated that the degree of assertiveness assigned to the androgynous person was an "average" midway between that assigned to a masculine or a feminine person.

Analysis of the affiliation cluster, which was comprised of traditionally feminine traits, also revealed a sex of stimulus person by sex-role of

stimulus person interaction. The pattern of the means, illustrated in Figure 2, revealed that in this case the androgynous sex-role was not averaged between masculine and feminine sex-roles. Instead, the androgynous person was considered no different from the sex-typed female or sex-reversed male.

Investigation of the masculinity/femininity factor again indicated a significant sex of stimulus person by sex-role interaction. The pattern of this interaction resembled that for the affiliation cluster in that the androgynous person was rated very similar to the same sex person described with all feminine adjectives. That is, the androgynous male was rated as feminine as the sex-reversed male, and the androgynous female was rated as feminine as the sex-typed female.

Evidence for a physical attractiveness stereotype was found for all variables except assertiveness. This stereotype, however, appeared to reflect more of a "what is ugly is bad" attitude than a "what is beautiful is good" philosophy. High and medium attractive persons were rated similarly for ability, affiliation and masculinity/femininity, and in all cases were rated higher than the unattractive person. Only on the dimension of social likability, however, did a true "what is beautiful is good" effect emerge.

Analysis of the joint effects of physical attractiveness and sex-role stereotypes suggested that they do not interact, but act cumulatively to affect our impressions of people. Results of these studies indicated that generally, the low attractive - sex-reversed person was least preferred. Additionally, these results suggested that the relative impact of these two stereotypes depends upon the dimension being evaluated. For example, when a person's assertiveness was being rated, his or her

sex-role was extremely important, whereas his or her attractiveness had no effect. Alternatively, when the evaluative dimension was ability, attractiveness affected evaluations, but sex-role did not.

Discussion

To summarize, results of these two studies add support for the assertion that the androgynous sex-role has advantages over traditionally sex-typed or sex-reversed roles. In particular, the androgynous person was rated as more physically attractive, more popular, and more interesting that the sex-typed or sex-reversed person. This suggests that a balance of masculine and feminine characteristics is beneficial not only in terms of greater behavioral flexibility and higher self-esteem, but also in terms of greater likability in the eyes of others. This implies that deviation from traditional roles is acceptable as long as the person maintains a balance between cross-sex characteristics and those appropriate for one's own sex.

However, these results further suggest that androgyny might be a more positive alternative to traditional sex-role stereotyping for women than it is for men. Specifically, the androgynous woman was rated higher than or equal to the sex-typed woman on all evaluative dimensions. The androgynous male, on the other hand, while rated higher than the sex-typed male on likability and affiliation, and equal to him in ability, was also rated as less assertive and less masculine than the sex-typed male. Since past research (e.g., Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972) has indicated that these latter two traits are positively valued for males in our society, these findings suggest than an androgynous sex-role might not always be as desirable an alternative for males as it is for females.

It is intriguing that a balance of masculine and feminine characteristics did not detract from evaluations of a person on affiliative traits but did detract with respect to assertive traits. One possible explanation for these findings might be that a moderate degree of assertiveness and a high degree of affiliativeness represent the most positive evaluation of a person. In other words, being extremely aggressive, forceful and outgoing may not be as desirable as being extremely kind, warm and understanding.

An alternative possibility is that androgyny may be perceived to be more similar to a feminine sex-role than to a masculine sex-role. Consistent with this explanation, androgynous females were rated as feminine as sex-typed females, while androgynous males were rated as nonmasculine as were sex-reversed males.

With the exception of ratings of masculinity/femininity, no main effects for sex of stimulus person were observed in these studies. This suggests that if information about a person's sex-role characteristics is available, impressions will be formed on the basis of this information rather than on biological sex. This supports Deaux's (1976) hypothesis that sex differences are most likely to emerge if additional information about a person is lacking or is ambiguous.

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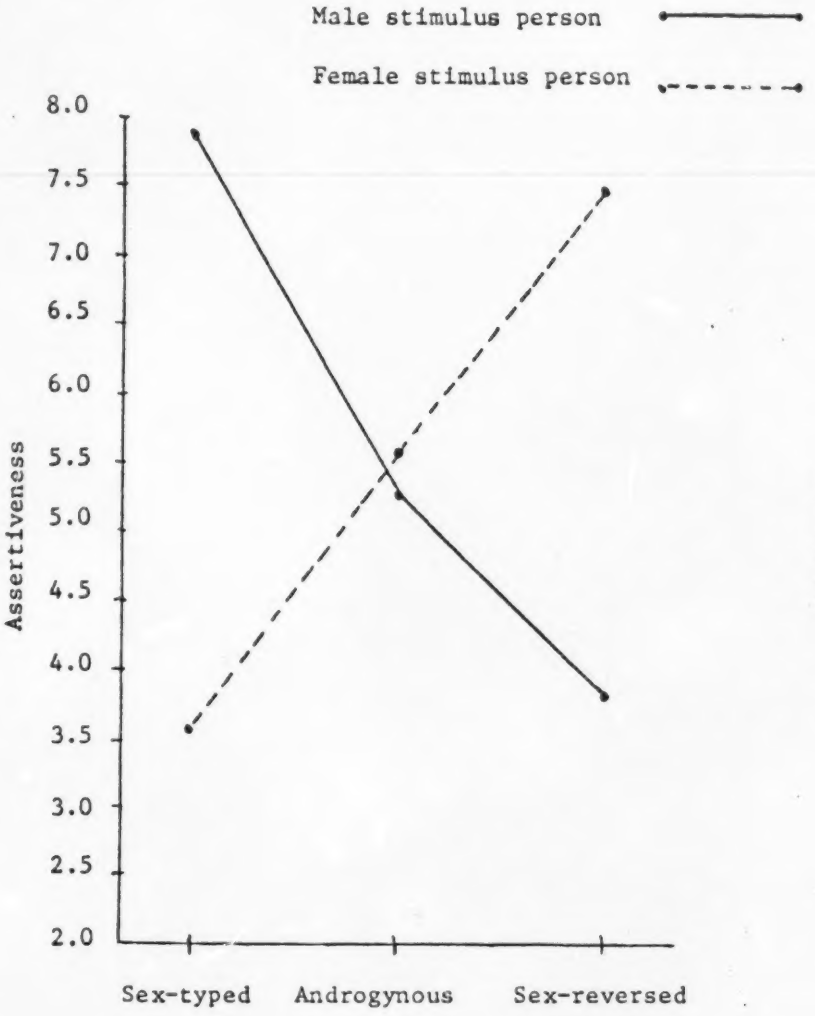

Fig. 1. Sex of stimulus person x Sex-role of stimulus person interaction for ratings of assertiveness cluster.

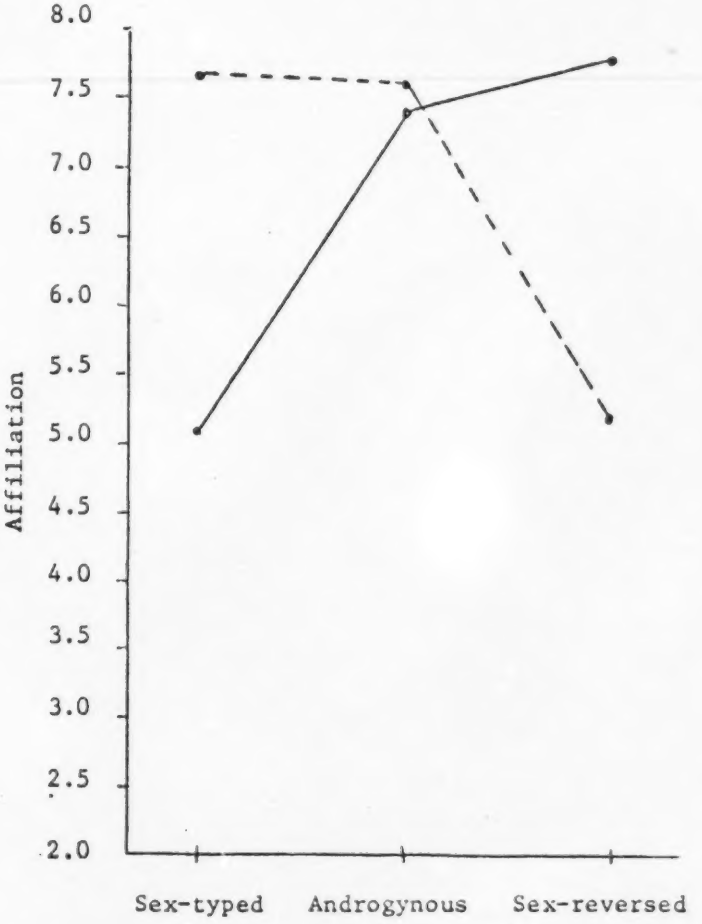

Fig. 2. Sex of stimulus person x Sex-role of stimulus person interaction for ratings of affiliation cluster.